

**TESTIMONY OF DAVID SUTHERLAND
DIRECTOR OF GOVERNMENT RELATIONS**

Before the Environment Committee – March 14th, 2011

In Opposition to Bill 5363 - An Act Transferring the Conservation Functions of the Department of Environmental Protection to the Department of Agriculture.

On behalf of The Nature Conservancy, I would like to express our opposition to Bill 5363, which would transfer the conservation side of the Department of Environmental Protection to the Department of Agriculture.

Some proponents of this bill have the very laudatory goal of ensuring that the conservation functions of the DEP are not overshadowed by the permitting and enforcement side of the agency. Indeed, the conservation side has been too long neglected and we express concern about this in regards to Bill 6386. Some proponents are also concerned that the Department of Agriculture has too often been proposed for elimination, and see this bill as a way of making that alarming prospect more difficult to implement.

I fail to see, however, how this proposal would significantly strengthen either agency. If the General Assembly and any given Governor's administration are inclined to provide insufficient funding for state government's conservation and agricultural functions, they could underfund this new proposed agency just as easily.

I am further concerned, based on the wording of the title of this bill and some of the conversations I have had with proponents of this concept, that this bill is put forward with the attitude that DEP's conservation functions are being folded into and put under the Department of Agriculture. Maybe it's just semantics, but it keeps showing through – certainly in the wording of this bill's title. I consider myself to be a strong supporter of the Department of Agriculture and want to see it strengthened, but giving it the charge to be the steward of our state's natural lands would not be an appropriate way to do that. Managing an agency's own forest lands and parks is a vastly different function than providing critical assistance to our agriculture industry.

There are important ways in which the conservation and environmental quality sides of the DEP work together. Various permitting activities need to be informed by wildlife, fisheries and other conservation scientists. Conversely, scientists in the enforcement and permitting side provide valuable information to staff in the conservation section. This information could still be shared if the two sides of the agency were to be separated, but why make this process less efficient?